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The Lampedusa Mystery

By John Lukacs

PHOENIXVILLE, Pa. — Lampedusa is a very small rocky island in the southern Mediterranean, bypassed even when the great battles of World War II raged thereabouts. Before the fall of Mussolini, it surrendered to a British pilot who landed his plane on the island when it had run out of fuel.

During the recent fracas in Libya, a Libyan motor launch fired two rockets at Lampedusa. No one was hurt, because the missiles plopped into the sea short of the beach. Then we were told that these pieces of Libyan ordnance had been aimed at the intelligence station of the United States Coast Guard in Lampedusa.

The Coast Guard? In Lampedusa?

The United States Coast Guard was established in 1797 by an act of Congress, and its principal purpose was "to ensure the collection of customs duties" — a purpose later extended to include "life saving." Lampedusa is about 4,000 miles away from the east coast of the United States. What the devil does the United States Coast Guard have to do in Lampedusa?

One presumes that it guards the Lampedusan coast and keeps watch on the threatening movements of the monster fleet of the Evil Empire.

For at least 15 years now, the American people have been told that the naval supremacy of the United

States was being threatened by the growing war fleet of the Soviet Union, particularly in the Mediterranean. But where was the Russian Navy during all of the recent bump-and-crump around Libya? And where was the Soviet Navy when our President, God only knows for what purposes, sent the marines into Lebanon, stationing the Sixth Fleet in sight of Beirut — 4,500 miles from Newport News and yet only 400 air miles from the Soviet frontier? Lampedusa, too, is about five times closer to the Soviet Union than to the United States.

How many Americans know that their Government maintains a Coast Guard unit in Lampedusa? Did President Reagan know? Did a single Senator or Congressman know?

Evidently this, too, is part and parcel of the hoary principle enunciated by Woodrow Wilson: Make the World Safe for Democracy. This principle is — again, evidently — no longer good enough for President Reagan: he hopes, with his "Star Wars" program, to Make the Universe Safe for Democracy! Nevertheless, the road from Wilson to Reagan is a straight (and slippery) slope of "Excelsior!"

It doesn't matter that Wilson was a Democrat and Reagan a Republican. In 1956, halfway between Wilson's death in 1924 and 1966, the Republican Party platform called for nothing less than "the establishment of American air and naval bases all around the world." So much for the charge, still heard in 1956, that the Republican Party was "isolationist" and "conservative." To call the foreign policy of the Republicans "conservative" is

about as accurate as our laser bombs in Tripoli.

We have heard a lot lately about the prudent statesmanship of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, including his warning about the "military-industrial complex." In fact, during his Presidency, America contracted alliances with two dozen states and established air and naval bases in another three or four dozen countries. By the end of the 1950's, the President and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, probably could not even list them on a piece of paper — not to mention the outposts of the Central Intelligence Agency (central? intelligence?), which was already in the business of "covert" operations.

It would be interesting to know something about a few more of these American bases. Perhaps the United States Wildlife Service may be found in the Tremiti, also in the Mediterranean; or the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Linosa; or the Office of Weights and Measures in Pianosa. The possibilities are endless, and who knows?

To Make the World Safe for Democracy is not so different from another slogan — What's Good For America Is Good For the World. Yes, Woodrow Wilson was a Democrat: but Republicans such as Herbert Hoover, John Foster Dulles and Richard Nixon, among others, have all been avowed Wilsonians. Ronald Reagan's middle name is Wilson — Ronald Wilson Reagan. The author G.K. Chesterton said that coincidences are spiritual puns.

I am an old-fashioned conservative, so let me ask: What the hell is the Coast Guard doing in Lampedusa? □

John Lukacs is author of "Outgrowing Democracy: A History of the United States in the Twentieth Century."